

Washington, DC (May 12, 2011) – Congressman Gus Bilirakis (FL-09), Vice Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, and Rep. Tim Walz (MN-01), want to make it a crime for people or companies to unlawfully charge veterans who apply for disability benefits.

After learning of abuses by groups charging veterans money to file claims for benefits they may never receive, Bilirakis and Walz have introduced HR 1826, bipartisan legislation that would make it a misdemeanor to illegally charge veterans for filing a disability claim.

"The law clearly states that people cannot charge veterans for filing benefits claims with the Veterans Affairs Department, but unfortunately some fly-by-night groups have discovered there are no repercussions for this unconscionable act," Bilirakis said. "Our veterans deserve access to benefits and assistance and we must prosecute those who take advantage of our nation's heroes."

Since the time of the Civil War, federal law has prohibited charging a fee to veterans who apply for a disability pension, but the Veterans Affairs Department is currently unable to enforce the law against these operations because there are no repercussions available.

"When our warriors apply for VA benefits, they should not have to worry about being scammed by groups trying to profit off their sacrifice and service," said Walz, who is a 24 year veteran of the Army National Guard. "While charging a veteran to file their claim is already illegal, this legislation would make it a misdemeanor. I believe those who attempt to take advantage of our veterans deserve harsh penalties and I look forward to working with my good friend, Rep. Bilirakis, to get this bill enacted into law."